

# Introduction

Since the beginnings of modern dance, experts have speculated and argued about the essentials of modern dance choreography. The ongoing controversy has produced as many theories as there are dancers and teachers.

The first forty years of modern dance development evolved around a core of established standards based on principles borrowed from other art forms. This search for fixed formulae led to a lengthy list of prescribed requirements essential for “good” choreography. Referred to as elements of dance, these requisites included such considerations as variety, contrast, balance, climax, sequence, transition, repetition, harmony, and unity. The preferences of dance artists and educators have varied widely from a random selection of some of these essentials to a strict insistence on the inclusion of all of them as indispensable to dance choreography. Since these requirements reflect principles borrowed from other art fields rather than those intrinsic to the movement medium, I believe it is risky to attribute absolute or final character to them unless they can be proven essential to choreography through thorough testing.

I recently attempted a research study in an effort to weigh the relative merits of choreographic structure and to identify essential elements of a movement theme in modern dance composition.<sup>1</sup> The

1. Margery J. Turner, “A Study of Modern Dance in Relation to Communication, Choreographic Structure, and Elements of Composition,” *Research Quarterly of the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation* 34, no. 2 (May 1963): 219–27.

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results of my study showed that several of the traditional “elements” could be eliminated without impairing the whole; I concluded that the validity and indispensability of established essentials are highly questionable.

In order to build a firm philosophical foundation on which modern dance can grow and flourish, considerable study of choreographic ideas and values is needed. Such a foundation can evolve from study combining the extensive experiences of experimental dance artists and the empirical findings emerging from the dance research laboratory.

The pioneers in contemporary modern dance continue to discover new frontiers in their search for new expression. Since these innovators work intuitively, without regard for facts and findings, it is up to the dance researcher to supply the study and evaluations that are needed for the further development of dance. A person with extensive training and experience, the researcher should approach dance study free of personal bias or loyalty to any one school or point of view. Understanding both the artist and the needs of education, he must approach his task with the objectivity of a scientist and the sensitivity of an artist.

Unfortunately, there are too few dance researchers in the field. Dance teachers have tended to dismiss dance research because they reject the idea of measuring art. But they must be shown that there are many kinds of measurement and types of research other than statistical and quantitative evaluations. If educators and dance artists were to combine forces, applying their creative imagination to research design as well as to dance choreography, they could contribute significantly to the enrichment of the dance medium. Until such a collaboration is effected, dance research will have a long way to go to keep pace with the rapid changes the artists are making.

During the first half of this century, modern dance underwent many phases and forms. It moved from the free form period (adapted to education as natural dance) to the mechanistic phase with its rigidity, lack of imagination, and gross muscularity. The

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introspective and psychological phases were marked by emphasis on personal anguish, Freudian symbolism, and social consciousness.

Since the late 1940s, a second cycle of modern dance development has begun to emerge. Departing radically from the underlying traditional principles that served the first cycle, the new dance reflects the most recent technological developments in space, electronics, and the mass media. Its reliance on nonliteral choreography has meant the avoidance of the human emotional involvement that was so characteristic of the first cycle. Individuality is held supreme, as each artist seeks to discover dance for himself in terms of its basic materials and his own philosophical values.

During this same period a strong trend toward nonliteral choreography has been evident in ballet as well as in modern dance. This has resulted in a radical departure from ballet of previous periods. These changes are reflected most clearly in the works of George Balanchine and Robert Joffrey. Much of their choreography strongly resembles modern dance of the late forties. In contemporary ballet the story is all but extinct; even electronic music has found its way into the ballet world. This merging of forms has led to employment of some modern dance choreographers by ballet companies. The trend will probably continue to merge these two forms. One day we may refer to the various forms of dancing as simply *dance*, and identify the kind by the person producing it. The demands of musical comedy, as well as newer movements in various art forms, have also been influential in bringing about changes on the contemporary dance scene.

Unhappily, educational dance has not kept up with the exciting new directions in dance with their profusion of experimental styles. One reason for this cultural lag has been the notable slowness of educators to adapt to changes: many have had minimal training and infrequent exposure to recent trends because of geographical isolation from the dance centers. The gap is widened further by the dearth of people who are qualified to inform educators about the changing dance scene and by the financial limitations that prevent

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professional companies from traveling. Hopefully, the increasing availability of foundation and government matching grants will allow more dance companies to travel extensively.

One of the ways in which the cultural gap can be bridged is through the wider use of good dance films and written teachers' guides. Although high quality dance films are rare and at best cannot compare to a live dance performance, they can be valuable as an additional learning experience. If we are to bring dance education up to date, we must raise the money to meet the high cost of film production and conveniently located film libraries.

The lag can be further reduced by the employment of dance artists for teaching at the college level. Experience has shown that professional dancers as college teachers have created better understanding and acceptance of the radical, sophisticated departures typical of the new dance. With dance innovators working on their own campuses, colleges will be able to witness firsthand the significant new developments in contemporary dance.